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## STRINDBERG AND THE WOMAN QUESTION

Strindberg's first dramatic work "*Fritänkaren*," was written in 1869 and published anonymously the following year. Concerning the genesis of this work the author has this to say in his autobiographical work "*Jäsnings tiden*": "Woman-worshiper that he was, he so constructs the plot as to make it fall to the lot of a woman to serve as mediator between him and his father. And this noble rôle he gives to his stepmother." That in the drama the woman fails to carry out her mission is of no special interest to us now. But the fact is of interest, that even in his earliest literary production Strindberg gives to woman a central place, that he makes her play the part of mediator and that in this connection he characterizes himself as a woman-worshiper. Throughout his entire subsequent authorship he gives woman this central place. She is indeed deprived of the noble part of mediator and given another less noble part to play; but as for himself, he, the alleged "woman-hater," remains a woman-worshiper to the end.

The female characters in Strindberg's earlier works are everywhere drawn with a touch that is warmly sympathetic and is at times one of almost romantic adoration. This is true of Kristina in "*Mäster Olov*" (1872); Margareta and Cecilia in "*Gilletts hemlighet*" (1875-1880); Margit in "*Herr Benkts hustru*" (1882); Lisa in "*Lycko-Pers resa*" (1882); the parson's wife in "*Högre ändamål*" (1882), and others. But in the two of these works, in which the female characters have been delineated with the most painstaking care, and with the greatest psychological consistency, namely "*Mäster Olov*" and "*Herr Benkts hustru*" there is, however, to be found, at the root of things, a painful sense of "the soul's utter isolation" ["—*själens obotliga ensamhet*—"] the isolation of the soul of man from that of woman.

Already in part one of "*Giftas*" (1884) the author's tone has suffered a change. The halo of enchantment about her head has disappeared. The full light of day falls sharply and pitilessly upon her; the author contemplates her with an eye at once saner and more keenly critical; all the complex traits in her nature receive their due and proper attention at his hand.

The twelve stories in this work aim to show that, though marriage is not an ideal institution, it is, nevertheless, the best possible under present conditions, an institution in which love must pilot its perilous way amongst innumerable economic, conventional and pathological reefs and shoals, ever present, ever threatening. In the foreword the author proclaims woman's equality with man as to her rights of education, franchise, the holding of any and all offices, etc.—claims that he considers justified, and tending to remedy the existing evil both in the community at large and especially in the mutual relation of the sexes.

Strindberg began the writing of "*Giftas*" near the end of May, 1884; by July 4th he had finished part one. But partly before and partly after writing this work the author had been engaged upon another entitled "*Utopier i verkligheten*." In this, one of the best written of all his works, Strindberg finds that the true solution of the problems of social reform, including marriage, is to be sought in socialism. The same views are expressed in "*Kvarstadsresan*" written in November and December, 1884. As regards Strindberg's conception of woman, this point marks the end of the first period in his literary activities. The second follows close upon the first and is strikingly different in character.

In 1885 Strindberg completes part two of "*Giftas*." In this he brings to light all that is dark and warped in love and in woman, scourging it with biting satire. From now on, it appears, he wages relentless war on woman, neither asking nor granting quarter. She is a parasite living on man; she lacks the most elementary perceptions of right and wrong; she is unjust, cruel, shamelessly exacting in her demands, imperious and eager for power though deficient in every quality of leadership; she is a creature stunted in development. And Strindberg "proves" by physiological and psychological data that she occupies an intermediate position between child and man, between the Negro and the Caucasian; but in spite of this she insists upon her full equality with man, clamors for rights and privileges without corresponding duties and obligations; organized society she does all in her power to destroy by competing with man in the labor market; home she makes a hell on

earth. Such is the theme, which Strindberg presents in endless variety throughout nearly all of his subsequent literary productions. I need only remind you of "*Fadern*," "*Fordringsägare*," "*Havsbandet*," and "*En dåres bikt*" published during the eighties and nineties, and of "*Dödsdansen*," "*Götiska rummen*," and "*Svarta Fanor*" of later years. Time will not permit me to cite passages from these works, but whoever has even a slight acquaintance with Strindberg's writings knows that in clearness and incisiveness his language leaves little or nothing to be desired in the treatment of his chosen theme.

How has so complete a change in Strindberg's point of view been brought about? Must there not of necessity be some explanation of it all? What has occurred?

In October 1884, shortly after part one of "*Giftas*" had been published, legal action was instituted against Strindberg as the author of this work. Leaving his family distressed by sickness in Switzerland, where he was living at the time, he was compelled speedily to go to Sweden, there to defend himself before a court of law against the charges preferred against him. True, he was acquitted (on Nov. 17th), and at once returned to the bosom of his family, but he is now a nervous wreck, shattered in mind and body; incapable of literary activity for some time, and financially embarrassed. Whether right or wrong, he stoutly maintains that the champions of women's rights through their agitation had caused the indictments against him, had torn him from his family when his presence was most needed there, had, in short, ruined him. "Such is tender-hearted woman's method of warfare!" he exclaims.

During this brief stay in Stockholm he had been hailed as the chosen leader of the literary coterie of "the Young Sweden" of the eighties. But shortly after his return to Switzerland he learns that he has been deposed, that his former friends and disciples recognize him no more. The reason? The women, who in a spirit of jealousy and revenge have dethroned him that they might bestow the literary leadership upon one of their own number, the author Mrs. Edgren-Leffler. What impression this would make on a man so hypersensitive as Strindberg, a man by no means unconscious of his own worth, can be readily understood.

During his stay in Switzerland fate had decreed that he should live at a pension, where he was the only man among some thirty women. He observed them at table, between meals, at all times, indolent, loquacious, and pleasure-loving, while their husbands, each in his own sphere, in the countinghouse in the city, in the government office in Paris, or at some military post in Tonking were slaving themselves to death in order to supply the means by which their wives might satisfy their capricious desires. He discovers that *man* is the oppressed one, the domestic slave.

He is, naturally, an interested observer of the literary activities in Sweden. Just at this time the book market is flooded by works dealing with the question of women's rights. "Sweden's 11,000 scribbling mamsells"—the expression is Strindberg's—preach a crusade against the oppressed condition of woman, and against her oppressor, man. Ibsen's "*Et Dukkehjem*" is, innocently enough, the cause of this movement, which, with the speed and irresistible force of an avalanche, threatens to overwhelm and bury all other interests. The woman question becomes a sort of religion, which with godlike authority sits enthroned upon its altar, graciously receiving the offerings of its worshipers and maliciously punishing the unfaithful. Strindberg's whole nature revolts at this spectacle. In righteous indignation he assaults this new mandatory doctrine that is shackling the spirits of men, and Ziska-like he strikes right and left but his attack is like Hercules's engagement with the Lernæan hydra: for every head cut off two other heads grew out instead. The consequences soon manifested themselves. His plays are not staged, he can find no publisher for his works in Sweden—"Tschandala," for example, is published in Danish—and if, driven by poverty, he produces something which cannot reasonably give offense he is grossly underpaid: for "*Hemsöborna*," one of his grandest works, Bonnier pays him the munificent sum of eighty dollars. He is condemned to that most cruel of all deaths to an author—oblivion.

But this is not all. Another event occurs, more vitally important than any yet mentioned. Strindberg's marital happiness has been destroyed. How? A *woman* has thrust herself between him and his wife, lured the latter away from her hus-

band and ruined their home. All attempts, for the sake of their children to continue to live together, prove futile; the perpetual discord becomes unbearable, and in January 1891, they seek and are granted a divorce. What untold suffering this must have caused Strindberg can be surmised from the reading of "*En dâres bikt*" and "*Svarta Fanor*." His old passionate love for the wife still holds him fettered: "I hate her because I love her!" he exclaims. This statement explains all of Strindberg's so called woman-hatred; it is the reverse side of his love. The pains of disillusion make him bitter. And when *The Link*—"Bandet," as you know, is the name of one of Strindberg's plays, referring to the children of an unhappy marriage—when this link is broken, wounds are inflicted that throughout Strindberg's whole life never cease to bleed. Having once read it, who can ever forget the blacksmith's grief over his three dead children in the opening scene of "*Himmelrikets nycklar*," written shortly after Strindberg's separation from his wife.—Surely, to him who loves much, much shall be forgiven.

Strindberg's views of the woman-question can, it seems to me, be summarized under two heads. And in spite of all exaggerations it cannot be denied that he has placed his finger upon the two most vulnerable points. The one is the importance of the economic problems in the solving of the woman-question. So long as woman is economically dependent upon man, her position must naturally be one of subordination. This is inevitable. But, says Strindberg, woman has never desired economic freedom, has never wished to work. The husband must even hire others to perform her duties in the home. And it is not just, when she *has* forced her way into the various fields of man's labor, for her to refuse to contribute to the support of the children and the household. As a matter of fact, her labors outside of the home are not to the best interests of society, not only because she then enters into competition with man, but also because she is thereby drawn from her highest duty—that of motherhood.

The second point deals with woman's lack of original and productive talent. As a mere performing artist she ranks well up with man, but as a creative artist she is by far his inferior.

In the spheres of art, literature, science, and invention woman's name shines with a paler light than does that of man. I believe that an honest and sane consideration of this point will sustain Strindberg's assertion. At least up to the present time—we can, of course, not speak for the future.

In closing permit me a final word by way of attempt to reduce Strindberg's so called woman-hatred to its true proportions. Not against woman as such does he contend but against a degenerated type, as he considers it—the emancipated woman, who with the battle cry, “down with the tyrants,” makes war on man; a woman, who no longer wishes to be a woman, but rather a half man—half, because she cannot be the whole; a woman, who tramples under foot her highest and holiest duties, who scorns and shuns maternity. Strindberg has given us fearful pictures of such women and it was these that he hated with what he calls his “great and glorious hatred.” But on the other hand, what author has given us more lovable women than Strindberg even in the later period, as for example in “*Svanvit*,” “*Påsk*,” “*Sagor*” and others? Who has pictured more beautifully the love of man and woman than he? Never did the Swedish language take on such glorious forms, never did it sing in richer, deeper tones than when Strindberg gave expression to this inspiration of love. Who has ever bowed his head with deeper reverence before a mother, or paid her greater homage than he? His works abound with beautiful instances in evidence of this. No! woman-hater Strindberg never was; let that fact be fixed once for all. It is hardly probable, moreover, that a woman-hater would enter three times into wedlock, and, following the experiences he had, after his 60th year be on the point of a fourth betrothal and marriage.

In Strindberg's views on the woman-question I can, therefore, see nothing puzzling or inexplicable, nor indeed anything contradicting. On the contrary I behold with feelings of wonder and admiration what vast expanses Strindberg's spirit is able to cover in its flight. How rich the creative genius which has given us such strikingly contrasted types of women as those in “*Påsk*” and “*Fadern*.” In his “*Studier över Sverges hednalitteratur*” Birger Nerman calls attention to the peculiar fact that the same people and period that have created the tender,

lyric character of Ingeborg in the Hjalmar-saga, have also possessed the creative power to produce the harsh, repulsive female vikings of the Amazon sagas. May it not be possible that the similarity between Strindberg's art and these literary fragments of the viking age gives evidence that Strindberg to a larger extent than any other represents the primeval forces of the Swedish genius—the folk-soul which breaks forth spontaneously into song?

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